COVER SHEET

Performing Research

Erica McWilliam

Cheap Theatrics?

The word 'performing' has for some time now been the object of some suspicion in the social and human sciences. Just as the word 'training' has seemed to connote something less substantive than 'education', and just as the word 'government' has connoted something less all-embracing than 'State', the word 'performing' has been tainted by its dangerous proximity to cheap (or mere) theatrics. While 'performing' has achieved some discursive legitimacy when followed by the word 'arts', it is that same legitimacy that damns the word in the context of the social sciences. Performing as 'acting', the performer as 'actor', the stage as 'artifice' – all this speaks of an invented or fictive domain that exists in opposition to a scientific world demanding 'real', 'hard' data. In other words, as a descriptor of social scientific research, 'performing' is suspect for taking us away from the sort of authenticity that social scientists call *reliability* and *validity*.

It has taken a new wave of theorising to open up possibilities for using the word 'perform' to connote more profound understandings of identity formation and human conduct. French poststructuralist writers like Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze have worked to turn liberal humanistic common sense on its head. In naming 'education' as a sub-set of a larger project called 'training', 'the State' as a technology or set of tactics within a larger project called 'government', and 'performance' as a substantive matter of self-production, such writers have made it possible to reclaim apparently weak and/or suspect vocabularies. By refusing neat distinctions like surface-or-substance, reality-or-artifice, such theorising has made trouble for any and all binary oppositions by unsettling the epistemological assumptions that underpin them.

Performance as epistemology

Thus reclaimed, 'performing research' can work as a provocation to re-think both the research act and the researcher's identity. It makes it possible to pay attention to the scripts that are (and are not) available for describing a 'real' research act and how to

do ‘real work’ as researchers. Put another way, it enables a *problematisation* of research, that is, an interrogation of the ways that research “offers itself to be, necessarily, thought” (Foucault, 1985: 11). In so doing, it draws attention to what counts as true research. The conduct of research, researcher identity and the products of research become available to be understood as “a game of truth and error” (Foucault, 1985: 6) rather than a search for Truth itself.

In thinking of research as game-playing, it is important to do so without falling into the trap of thinking of games as frivolous. “Imagining new moves or new games” is, according to Lyotard, a most important means by which new knowledge is established and transmitted (Lyotard, 1979: 53). This is demanding work and serious business, as is amply demonstrated by observation of children at play. Rules for conducting oneself as one should need to be socially negotiated, established and monitored for the game to work. Sometimes the rules are idiosyncratic, while at other times they are made available as “prescriptive texts…that elaborate rules, opinions and advice as to how to behave as one should” (Foucault, 1985: 12). Such rules allow anyone playing the game to “question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects” (p. 13).

In recent times, the rules for performing real research have changed. ‘Bottom-up’ conceptualisations of the nature and purposes of the research act have challenged a long-term ‘rule’ that *disinterest* is the correct disposition of the researcher and thus constitutes the proper starting point for imagining a means of inquiry. While many still insist that the ethos of disinterestedness, ie, of “detachment…from automatic reduction to conditions of instrumental functionality”, ought to be the driving logic of research (Filmer, 1997: 57), the idea of “promot[ing] disinterested research for its own sake” (p.57) has come under pressure from a growing band of educators and others for whom ‘performing research’ ought to be seen to work the interests of a particular group or community located in a particular time and place. For this group, ‘advocacy research’ should not be an oxymoron (see Lather, 1991). The argument is made that ‘bias’ or/ as pre-judgment, to use Gadamer’s interpretation of that word, is always already present in research design, whatever claims are made about its ‘scientific’ detachment. All that science that ‘proved’ lower IQs in non-anglo ethnic groups stand debunked for what such science did not own up to in terms of its own interestedness.

The fact that feminist writers like Patti Lather have, in the last decade, come to express their ambivalence about some aspects of 'advocacy research' is an important development in the performance of research as social science. Lather (1998) notes the apparent movement away from disinterestedness in the project of education as an outcome of the growing demand that educational research be "centered by such concepts as 'empathy', 'voice' and 'authenticity'" (p.1). The problem that she perceives arising out of this demand is one which has also been identified by Tom Popkewitz (1997) and Deborah Britzman (1997) in recent times – namely, the 'wish for heroism' on the part of the researcher, a wish that is accompanied, problematically, by the presupposition of the researcher as "a coherent subject…in charge of their desires and identifications", one who "speaks for themselves" and is "capable of knowing others" (Lather, 1998: 1). In drawing attention to the "typical investments and categories of ethnography" which accompany inquiry as a redemptive project, all these authors make trouble for any research that responds to "the demand for voice and situatedness" (Britzman, 1997: 31).

Not withstanding such scholarly ambivalence, the invitation to situatedness has been and continues to be particularly inviting to those "practitioner/researchers" (Brennan, 1998: 83) who see themselves in the picture of doing 'real research' that benefits 'real others' at the local level. This trend to work-placed based research or self-study has been noted as especially strong in research that is performed within the framework of a professional doctorate program (McWilliam et al, 2002). In Australia, we have seen an increase in both interpretive and participatory research, and a decrease in large scale quantitative studies (DETYA, 2001: 6). Of the qualitative studies that have been undertaken, there is a trend to "more small highly focused qualitative studies" that seek to "address…educators' problems" (p.6). In postgraduate research, the pattern appears to be that topic and methodology are "largely driven by individual choice, based on interest and personal belief about the value of the work" (p.7).

This shift in the performance of research from the mega- and the measurable to the nuanced and the nearby has been for better *and* worse. It allows more non-academic individuals and groups to see themselves in the picture of performing research and to see themselves conducting research by non-traditional means. Such research promises a richer payoff for local stakeholders seeking to solve local problems in context-

specific ways. At the same time, locally performed research of this type can militate against the sort of critical detachment that makes a space for *thinking about thinking about* research. The desire to get out there where the real action is can precipitate a premature rush to the field, as though the space of the field of practice were readily knowable and identifiable, and as though turning a field - or the people or practices within it - into a 'case' of something were innocent, neutral or relatively uncomplicated work. To misrecognise "the space of the field" (St Pierre, 2000) as already known, fixed and immutable is to de-limit the possibilities for 're-seeing' what counts both problems and their potential solutions. What will inevitably be found is what we knew all along to be *out there*.

This is not to suggest that 'situated' studies have remained immune to theoretical development. For example, Amanda Coffey's struggle over the relationship between authority, authorship and realism in her ethnographic study (Coffey, 1996) or Antoinette Errante's (2000) concerns about methodological complacency in generating oral histories, are both indicative of the ways in which 'situated' studies can be thoughtfully performing in ways that attend to the relationship of the writer to the written, particularly in terms of the moral and ethical issues that arise when seeking to validating accounts of other lives 'in context'.

This shift from disinterestness or detachment to interested or situated performance of research mirrors larger shifts in pedagogical reasoning itself. The sort of 'disinterest' that Filmer speaks of is the detachment that has its historical roots in the pedagogy of Greek philosophers. The effectiveness of philosopher teachers like Georgias, for example, was attributed to:

> never having done anything for the sake of giving pleasure to another. . . not allow[ing] himself to be deflected by anything which might injure his health . . . but also refus[ing] to be troubled by other people's praise or blame or by the intervention of a fact which might disturb his thought. (Untersteiner, 1954: p. 94)

The raison d'etre of situated or interested research is at odds with this sort of thinking, in much the same way that contemporary notions of effective teaching stand in opposition to the ideal of personal detachment (McWilliam, 1999). The very notion that one ought

not to be swayed from truth, and its pursuit through systematic inquiry, by what others (students, colleagues, parents, employers) want or need, is anathema to the motivation which drives both professional educators *and* practitioner research as a student-focused, needs-driven, 'bottom-up' process or professional development. This is not intended as either an endorsement of current regimes of truth or a nostalgia for a noble past: it is simply a comment on how the imperative to research, like the imperative to teach, is now differently understood and enacted.

Performance as training

The idea that researchers can and should be 'developed' or trained and that higher degree programs are a useful way to do this is, like 'interested' research, a relatively recent historical idea. Certainly at the turn of the twentieth century, 'research training' (like 'advocacy research') was considered to be an oxymoron. It was deemed within the academy that original investigation, the art and science of true research, would not be forthcoming from "mere training" of the sort that was represented by the PhD (Rae, 2002). Training could only mean "damage to originality that slavish pursuit of [a]degree has caused" (Hoyle, cited in Rae, 2002: 131), and so the PhD remained suspect for decades in terms of its legitimacy as an induction into the mysterious and tightly bounded world called 'research'.

Concerns that the PhD would de-value the nature and purposes of research itself have of course had their echo at the other end of the twentieth century in the objections that continue to be-devil the professional doctorate. It is somewhat ironic that the PhD is now the considered the benchmark against all alternatives must be measured for their legitimacy. 'But is it really rigorous like the PhD?' is a question that would be impossible to think in British and Australian Universities at the beginning of the 1920s.

Professional doctorates have continued to make trouble for research in a number of ways, not the least of which is the extent to which professional doctorates extend or transcend specific disciplinary fields as hybridising or 'transdisciplinary' entities (Green, Maxwell & Shanahan 2001). Moreover, the misconception is still widespread still that the professional doctorate has been, in recent history, 'the alternative' to the

PhD. However, the emergence of the professional doctorate has not occurred as a process of rationalising PhD 'alternatives' into one competing category. Doctorates continue to exist that are neither PhDs nor professional doctorates, and these can be tracked from the late nineteenth century. For example, a DPead (Doctor Pedagogiae) was first offered at the University of Toronto in 1884 and conferred in 1898, while a 'non-PhD' doctorate (EdD) appeared at Harvard University in 1920. The University of Woollongong's Doctor of Creative Arts appears in 1983 as Australia's first 'alternative doctorate', and it is one that continues to be offered in very much the same spirit almost two decades later. It is worth noting that in Australia the PhD was first awarded at the University of Melbourne in 1948 (Noble, 1994: 23, 74). Furthermore, some PhDs have been defined more robustly, such as that at the ANU, to include research of the 'professional' kind.

In summary then, the term 'professional doctorate' - like the terms 'advocacy research' or 'research training' - no longer needs to be considered an oxymoron.

Performance as culture

Despite on-going ambivalence within the academy about the status of professional doctorates, such 'alternatives' and the pragmatic industry-friendly products they promise are very much in keeping with a new set of post-welfare policy imperatives in the UK and Australia that are focusing a new spotlight on the performance of research training. By tying government funding to higher degree progression and completion rates, governments in the UK and Australia are signalling their interest in research training as a matter of public accountability. Within the last decade, all Western governments have become *buyers* of higher education services; they are no longer patrons (McWilliam & O'Brien, 1999). As buyers, they are less involved in direct funding and more interested in indirect steering. Thus, governments have used funding mechanisms to encourage universities to self-regulate in line with 'national' interests and priority areas that they (government) have identified. Not only is this a less expensive option for any government, but it encourages, even demands, that research leaders and managers exercise new options in a competitive marketplace.

In this marketplace, funding is outcomes-focused ie, performance-based. An effect of this is that 'performing research' in higher degree programs is increasingly subject to

measurement – enrolment numbers, attrition rates, progression rates, numbers of graduates. This regime of measurement parallels business concerns for "fitness for purpose, quality control and assurance, mission statements and performance indicators, value addedness and audits" (Pring, 1992: 10). When applied to university teaching and learning, the regime foregrounds three interrelated issues in any university program: its purposes, the criteria for assessing achievement of those purposes, and a means for checking whether those criteria have been applied - an audit of *quality control* techniques (p.10). Thus measurement mechanisms can be distinguished as a "second tier" of quality monitoring, separate from, yet related to, quality control, the monitoring of the achievement of performance criteria.

Performing research, in this sense, involves paying attention to the systems of accountability that have been put in place as a defense against systemic arbitrariness (Strathern, 1997) within the university or other publicly funded organisation. This is the sort of arbitrariness that one might associate with a monastic culture in which 'apprentice' researchers come to know what it means to perform research in the private rooms of the professor researcher. The logic is that systems of management need to be uniform because individuals are not, nor are likely to be. This logic of procedural equity flies in the face of a more perverse reading of audit cultures as intentionally depersonalizing. This is not to argue that such cultures do not have depersonalizing effects. Rather, the point is that the logic of the intensifying of bureaucratic monitoring that is a feature of audit cultures is not simply 'one-size-fits-all' in terms of the individuals who are its 'products'. What is standard, however, is the particular model for measuring research performance as *organizational* performance.

The introduction of mechanisms to measure organizational performance has been for some time now a feature of a wide range of public and private universities (Shore and Wright, 1999). Whether or not these mechanisms heralds "a new form of coercive and authoritarian governmentality" (Shore and Wright, 1999: 1), the fact remains that managing the large and diverse populations who are now engaging in research worldwide requires a performance that is outside the "unique, informal culture" (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997: 57) of the traditional work of research and research training. Thus the craft knowledge of academics is being reshaped by administrative

interventions that work to achieve fair and efficient institutional practice. It is not that academic knowledge about research is being displaced altogether. Rather it is being made over as 'professional expertise' through a process that Ericson and Haggerty (1997) describe thus:

> [P]rofessionals obviously have 'know-how', [but] their 'know-how' does not become expertise until it is plugged into an institutional communication system. It is through such systems that expert knowledge becomes standardized and robust enough to use in routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions by professionals. (p.104)

The idea that research is being made the subject of "routine diagnosis, classification, and treatment decisions" is often viewed as a sinister, Orwellian development. However, the rush to resist this new regime often fails to acknowledge that research, as a sub-set of the organizational activities of universities, cannot exist outside risk management as "a system of regulatory measures intended to shape who can take what risks and how" (Hood et al, 1992: 136). For better and worse, researchers must 'plug in' to audit technologies, those "supremely reflexive" practices through which the university can make sense of itself as an organization, can "perform being an organization through the act of self-description" (Strathern, 1997: 318).

The standard models for measuring organizational performance are very much in evidence in the professional development of researchers-as-academics, and they are generally focused on the nature of organisational work (ie, generic leadership and management skills) as distinct from disciplinary knowledge. Within such a culture, the researcher is, for instance, called upon to perform all the emotional and aesthetic labour that is necessary to leadership (team building, conflict resolution, seeking feedback on performance), labour that appears both voluntary and natural (Adkins and Lury, 1999: 603), and labour that has little or nothing to do with traditional disciplinary or methodological knowledge. Given this massive cultural shift, it is little wonder that bemoaning the quantification of quality has thus become one of the more predictable laments of researchers who rely on funding from the public purse.

Performance as self-presentation

Some academic practices, however, are time-honoured and resistant to change. The public display of the researcher's body speaking research is still a key tactic in the dissemination of research as scholarship. In traditional academic settings, the researcher's body is called forth out of the laboratory/cloister/field to explain and defend conclusions, theories and findings. So 'performing research' has a physical dimension. From packed conferences to private conversations, researchers perform what it means to know things, and these performances work through the researcher's utterance and through inscriptions on the scholarly body. Despite the ready availability of virtual sites of engagement, large numbers of researchers continue to haul their bodies into places and parts unknown in order to 'present' their work to their peers and potentially interested others.

There are rules for such performances, and they are rules to do with the nature and purposes of scholastic instruction rather than learning. Researchers are called on in such forums to perform as 'bodies of knowledge' ie, as *sights* and *sites* of authoritative display (Angel, 1994:63). All 'good' researchers must claim some sort of authority, even those who seek to disrupt modernist mechanisms of authorial, scientific or pedagogical power. As textual and material 'bodies of knowledge', researchers posture and gesture what it means to be authoritative – to be 'in the know' - for a range of audiences, from undergraduates to editors. The strategic use of authoritative citations in an academic paper, for example, is a gesture that may serve the same symbolic function that a lecturer's body does when it grasps both sides of the lectern, leans forward, and utters measured and resonant sounds to an assembly of academic peers. In both of these instances, the scholarly performance functions to shore up the authority of the researcher turned writer/speaker.

As the domain of activity called research has become populated by a more diverse range of stakeholders, so too the performance of research authority has expanded to include more diverse bodies and choreographies. While the singular anglo male remains a ubiquitous presence in the performance of keynote conference addresses, the pedagogical performance of research is now more likely to involve differently inscribed bodies that speak from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds. Multiple speakers arranged in panels, critic/discussants and space for audience

participation are all part of a more complex set of interactive choreographies than the white male monologue that has dominated conferences for so long.

A recent threat to this greater performative diversity is the emergence of the powerpoint presentation as the mark of the truly authoritative research performance. Because of or despite its narrowly linear and cinematic logic, the seamlessly delivered powerpoint presentation has become a hallmark of the researcher as professional expert. As a non-negotiable in the pedagogical work of delivering a keynote address, powerpoint has the effect of rendering potentially critical audiences both passive and silent. While educators may want to question the effectiveness of such a strategy in terms of its learning outcomes, there is little doubt that a colourful and cleverly produced powerpoint presentation can work as a tactic to shore up the authority of the researcher. Of course, if the necessary technology is found to be faulty for inexplicable reasons, then the scholarly performance stands a greater than average chance of being undermined by the performance of the two or three technicians who have been summoned to solve the mystery of the machine.

While the pedagogical work of 'performing research' may seem to be trivial when compared with matters of epistemology or, indeed, of research culture or research training, there are real consequences for getting this wrong. At a time when we are witnessing the triumph of style as substance (McWilliam and Hatcher, forthcoming), we should not presume that academic and professional audience will somehow be 'outside' performativity in all its manifestations. We are condemned to perform and to do so in ways that are always already organised for us, whether we like it or not. And therein lies both the opportunity and the danger.

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